

# More on Student Friendly Learning Goals - The Tempered Radical

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## The Tempered Radical

November 22, 2008

### More on Student Friendly Learning Goals

Yet again, the Radical Nation has left me completely jazzed!

After writing about the process that our learning team has gone through in the past few years [to generate student friendly learning goals](#), the comment section of the blog entry exploded. It's been a busy week, so I haven't had a chance to respond---but with the amount of interest that the post has generated, I figured this strand needed more time and attention.



**Michelle---an old digital friend** who I haven't heard from in a while---raised an incredibly important point when she wrote:

*I checked out your resources and I'm going to give some thought to adding elementary level language to my goals. I'm still overwhelmed with the sheer amount of goals this includes since I am in a "self-contained" classroom and I teach all of the course subjects!*

I know just how you're feeling, Michelle! The amount of time and energy that we have to put into deconstructing standards and identifying essential learnings is AMAZING. And it multiplies

exponentially when you teach more than one subject.

***My advice to you: Start small.*** Begin with one unit for one of the different disciplines that you teach---and ignore the rest!

Much of the challenge in the work that we did was getting an actual process in place. We created a system for numbering our objectives so that they would be easy to tie to individual assessment questions. We created a system for writing our objectives and a document for sharing with our students. We created a system for aligning learning targets with the lessons that we were teaching. And we began with ***one unit from our Social Studies curriculum!***

*(Don't tell my principal, but we haven't even thought about doing this for Language Arts yet. We need some time to catch our collective breath!)*

By starting small, we were able to get the systems and structures down pat before moving on. Now, we could easily move into new curricula or units without any challenges because we can simply replicate the processes that we spent so long creating.

Does this make sense?

***Bethany jumped into the Radical waters*** for the first time with a nugget that I don't want anyone to miss. When talking about the weekly common assessment in her class, she wrote:

*It is just graded Yes or No (and they also rate themselves on their confidence on whether they mastered it).*

Getting students involved in the assessment of their own learning has been one of the best parts of our efforts to define student friendly learning goals. No joke---this is the first year in my sixteen year career that I've ever even tried to engage students in self-assessment, even though I've read all the relevant research about the importance of self-assessment.

The reason: ***I wasn't even sure*** of what they were supposed to know and be able to do!

Now that I've got clear targets written in language that everyone understands, self-assessment (and engaging parents in the assessment process) is a breeze.

***My boy Mike***---who lends a great voice to every conversation and who has challenged me to articulate my thinking time and again---wrote:

*Fortunately, my principal understands what's going on and only expects us to go through the motions and not let it get in the way of learning. So I have all of the required postings, with multi colored, professional graphs and charts and the principals can check the "he has the stuff posted" block on my evaluation forms.*

You know, Mike---I agree with Dina when she writes:

*Mike, your story makes my heart ache. I am in tremendous empathy with your frustration.*

You should be frustrated, Mike---but not with posting standards or learning goals. Instead, you should be frustrated ***with how badly your district botches PD!*** Remember---I was in the exact same shoes as you two years ago: Being presented with a new requirement that didn't make any sense to me at all.

The difference is that my principal---recognizing that process is more important than product---gave me the leeway to create a system of engaging students in their own learning that worked for me. It wasn't about using the system that he'd picked or the system that the district supported. It was about teachers wrestling with how to make their curriculum approachable to their kids.

The professional learning was nothing short of amazing. I'd argue that we know our curriculum better than we ever have before---and I'd argue that our efforts to engage students in their own learning are more effective than they would have been if we'd just followed the rules and filled in the boxes because *they are our efforts*.

***We own them. We care about them. We're proud of them.***

That's where PD has gone so horribly wrong. Decision-makers---in their sprints to ensure that every child learns---believe that they know best and that simple top down decisions can fix everything.

The funny part is that most teachers don't care what decision-makers know, even if they're right! In the end, the practices that we use in our classrooms have to be practices that we believe in. We can follow rules, but if we don't have buy-in over our work, our work will be mediocre at best.

***And Steve---who I had a chance*** to meet in person this week---has left me thinking times ten with this comment:

*Writing statements such as "Students Will..." almost robs students of the joy of learning. Why should students conduct a debate or review multiple perspectives when the teacher has already provided them with a glimpse of the finish line?*

This blows me away, Steve! After all, I just spent two years working to give my students a glimpse of the finish line---but your argument resonates with me because I learn the best when I'm not totally sure of what the finish line actually looks like.

For me, learning is making discoveries. Is it possible that posting clear and specific learning targets takes that opportunity away from our kids? And if so, is there a middle ground that we could craft that would allow teachers to post student-friendly learning goals without taking away discovery?

That's meat for a whole new post, I'm afraid! And I need to get my head wrapped around this. It feels right, but it's a pretty big monkey wrench in my master plans!

Good stuff....

***Thanks to all for a great conversation.*** I'm not sure you know how much I appreciate the comments that y'all leave. They make me smarter by the day!

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Posted at 03:49 PM in [Teaching Practice](#) | [Permalink](#) [ShareThis](#)


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## Comments

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As a K-5 music educator, I'm handed a set of standards and objectives that are sometimes uncomfortably (though necessarily) vague. As a fifth year teacher, I'm still trying to break down what this curriculum could look like for my students, given our resources and abilities. Your thoughts on that process are intriguing- not to mention helpful. Yet I find myself coming back to the same question: Is it worth my time to develop this detailed a system when a new administration two years from now is likely to demand a new style? I've only finished an MAT four years ago, and I'm already behind the jargon/method curve.

Posted by: Lauren | [November 26, 2008 at 03:13 PM](#)



Lauren asked:

Yet I find myself coming back to the same question: Is it worth my time to develop this detailed a system when a new administration two years from now is likely to demand a new style?

Hey Lauren,

Thanks for stopping by and I'm glad that you found some of these thoughts valuable.

As far as setting up a new system in the face of a possible leadership change, I think my answer would be to go for it---but be prepared to document the changes that you make, the impact that they have on your instruction and assessment, and the rationale behind your decisions.

That way, when a new administration tries to demand something different, you'll be able to effectively argue on behalf of the system that you create. All too often, we get frustrated at mandates that go against something that we don't buy into, but we do little to articulate why the systems that we DO buy in to matter.

I'm pretty convinced that if my school leadership changed tomorrow that I'd be able to keep my system of posting learning targets only because I can be pretty darn convincing about why it works.

So develop your system----and while you're at it, develop a deep understanding of why it matters.

That's how you end up with more influence in a building after a leadership change.

Does this make sense?

Bill

Posted by: [Bill Ferriter](#) | [November 27, 2008 at 07:12 AM](#)



I would add that most administrators will not change a music program because they do not have a music background. The sooner you can define your program and its intended outcomes, the better. It will be better for you as a professional, but more importantly the educational experience for each student will be enriched by your time and efforts!

Bill wrote, "So develop your system----and while you're at it, develop a deep understanding of why it matters...."

I cannot agree more!

Wiggins and McTighe have written several articles and books on the topic of "understanding." Through the Understanding by Design process, one educator or a team of educators "begin with the end in mind." The UbD process challenges educators to identify essential learning, key concepts and skills, BIG ideas and enduring understandings. The process of identifying essential learning requires educators to reflect on "what matters most."

The following practices are each beneficial to K-12 educators:

UbD - G. Wiggins & J. McTighe

Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction -  
Lynn Erickson

Curriculum Mapping -  
F. English;  
H.H. Jacobs

Professional Learning Communities -  
R. DuFour and others

Unpacking Standards -  
L. Ainsworth; D. Reeves

Common Formative Assessments -  
R. Stiggins; D. Reeves; R. Marano; R. DuFour; J. Popham and others

Differentiated Instruction  
C.A. Tomlinson

Does it matter which process we use? In my opinion, educators need to be focused and intentional about curriculum and instructional aims. Should each teacher use a script? No. Each teacher should identify the most essential understandings. When a new administrator is hired (and it will happen more than once) the essential understandings will not change. Content may change in an information age. Science and history will change as new discoveries will show us that past understandings were not completely true. One thing that will not change, regardless of the administrator is the identified essential understandings.

Useful questions to pose to begin the discussion on learning goals include:

1. What do we value?
2. How would we identify a successful student in this grade/course/program?
3. What are the skills, knowledge, experiences, and values that are at the center of our grade/course/program's curriculum?
4. What should a graduate from this grade/course/program be able to know and do?

Posted by: sweber | [November 29, 2008 at 09:36 PM](#)



Wow! This is difficult to respond to because there is so much said here! I loved your Readocide article. Teachers at my school want to give DIBELS to every student several times a year. I am against it because they want a "number" and are not asking the right questions about what this number might mean. Thanks for this conversation.

Posted by: Patty Jordan | [January 20, 2009 at 11:07 PM](#)

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**Bill Ferriter** teaches 6th grade language arts in North Carolina, where he was named a Regional Teacher of the Year for 2005-2006.

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